



A newsletter for members of the York University Retirees' Association (YURA)

Fall 2022

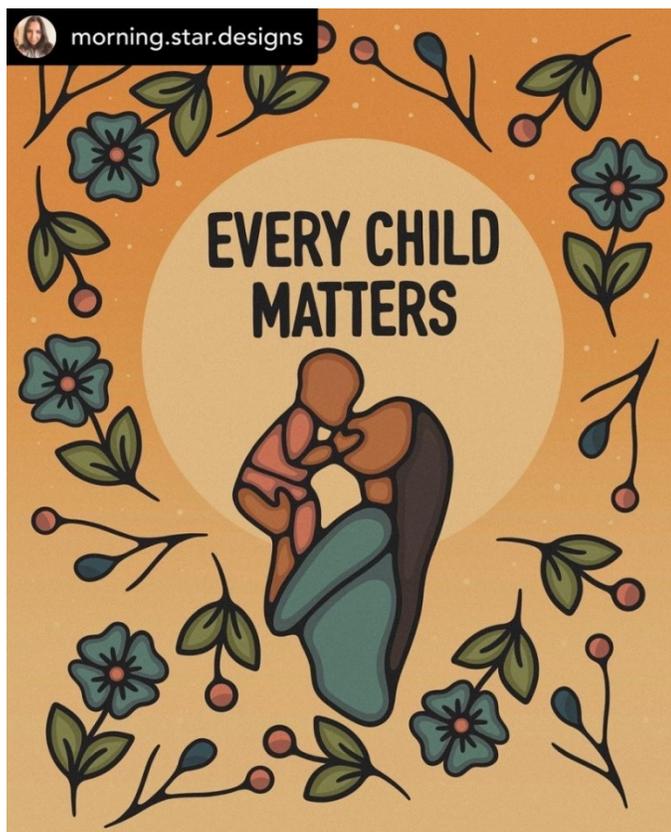
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NATIONAL DAY FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION



MESSAGE FROM THE YURA CO-PRESIDENTS

We hope that our members will take today to either participate in activities or learn more about various indigenous cultures or think about changes that need to occur in our society in order to truly activate reconciliation.

September 8 was a day we will never forget. Even though we knew the Queen had health challenges, it was still a shock to learn of her death. Some of us are amongst a small minority of Canadians who have experienced the reigns of three monarchs – a few of us were toddlers when George VI died, and Elizabeth became Queen. As was the case for so

many Canadians, Queen Elizabeth II was a grandmotherly figure for us. She led an exemplary life of service that we appreciate. We hope that King Charles III will serve wisely and compassionately.

Except for the sad news of September 8, it has been the best summer of the past three! Although COVID is still with us, most cases are not as serious as they would have been a couple of years ago. Our recent survey of YURA members indicated that nearly half our members are beginning to feel comfortable returning to in-person activities, although a third of us don't have the same comfort level. But things seem to be moving in the right direction, so we will continue to take care of ourselves and each other and think positively about the future.

What can we do to make the world a better place? As of September 20, ten of our members have signed up for the **Charity Challenge** by agreeing to walk at least 5 km any time in between September 16 and October 16 and finding sponsors to contribute to YURA graduate awards. To date, they have already raised more than \$17,000, and our goal is \$25,000!

Every year, the graduate students we have supported through our awards have testified that they could not have continued without our help. This year, after the devastating impact of the pandemic, that help is more than ever needed. Some promising grad students will drop out without our help. Please consider helping grad students in need by sponsoring one of our York University team members or signing up to walk/run for us in the virtual marathon at any time in October. **It has never been easier.** You just have to register and then find sponsors. **Here is the link to donate:** <https://raceroster.com/events/2022/34025/2022-tcs-toronto-waterfront-marathon/fundraising->

[organization/26882](#) . To sign up to do the walk, follow the instructions on the York University Retirees' Association web page at <https://www.yorku.ca/yura>, and scroll down to "Join the YURA Team in the 2022 TCS Charity Challenge!" If you need any help, contact Ian at igreene@yorku.ca.

Earlier this year, YURA members on our email list were asked to complete the first-ever survey of YURA members so we could learn more about what our members thought about our current activities, and how YURA could better support its members in the future. You will find a detailed report on the results on our web page, <https://www.yorku.ca/yura>, and a summary of some of the highlights in this *Newsletter*.

On August 23, we went back into **our office** at 101 Central Square and started setting it up for in-person activities. During our absence, the software on our computers was updated by the university's Information Technology Service, and we are getting used to the new applications. **We are looking for volunteers** to help us with the office hours on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays before and after noon hour, and monitoring telephone messages and YURA email. If you have an interest in doing so, please contact us at yura@yorku.ca.

We have new activities in the planning stage for the fall. Of course, at this time all of them are virtual--available on-line. However, it won't be long before we start our in-person activities again. If you have any ideas for on-line or in-person activities for our members, please send an email to Donna Smith at djsmith612@gmail.com.

We are delighted that **Dr. Irvin Studin has agreed to be our speaker at the YURA Annual General Meeting on Friday, October 28th via Zoom**, starting at 11:00 a.m. Considered one of the leading international policy thinkers and strategists of his

generation, Irvin Studin is Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of Global Brief magazine and President of The Institute for 21st Century Questions. He is also the Chair of the Worldwide Commission to Educate All Kids (Post-Pandemic). Dr. Studin will explain Canada's multiple crises coming out of the pandemic, and how Canada can survive and succeed in domestic and international terms alike, in a wicked post-pandemic world.

All YURA members will receive an invitation to attend the on-line AGM several weeks in advance, and again the day before the AGM. You can read more about Dr. Studin on the YURA web page.

We very much look forward to "seeing" you at the AGM, and we appreciate your fundraising help for the graduate scholarships. Through small steps, we can make the world a better place.

Sincerely,

– **Charmaine Courtis** and **Ian Greene**, Co-Presidents

Hospital Volunteers Needed

The North York General Hospital has reached out for volunteers now that the COVID regulations are relaxed. If you are interested, please go into their website www.nygh.on.ca and click on the heading "Careers and Volunteering." The notice is now posted on *our* web site. **Future requests of this nature will be updated on the website.**

The YURA Survey

As mentioned in the co-presidents' report, the YURA Executive Committee agreed to conducting a survey of its members to learn more about what they thought about our current activities, and how YURA could better support its members in the future. The survey was sent to YURA members on our listserv in February and March, and 240 out of

400 responded, which is an excellent response rate. A full report will be posted on the YURA web page < www.yorku.ca/yura > between October 7th and 11th. In this article, I'd like to highlight a few of the findings. With regard to our **communications**, we learned that our members prefer receiving emails from YURA only about once a month. Nearly 90% of respondents said that they looked at all of the YURA *Newsletters* that are published four times a year. Eighty per cent of our members reported reading the *Person-To-Person* at least occasionally, or perusing it, and of these, half read it regularly. Sixty per cent of our members checked our web site on an as-needed basis, although twenty per cent never checked it.

These results show a high degree of engagement in our publications from our members, though we need to encourage more of our members to look into our web site on a regular basis *as it would answer some of their questions*.

We wanted to find out something about our members' **retirement experiences**. Respondents were asked to indicate some positive aspects of retirement. Eighty per cent indicated that they had more time for family, friends and hobbies. Seventy-five per cent said they had less stress, and 30 per cent said they now had time to downsize. In addition, 50 of our members provided individual examples of the joys of retirement, from being able to write more, interact with family and friends more, and get involved in activities they regarded as a new stage of life.

Of course, our members also listed **challenging** aspects of retirement. More than half indicated that "keeping up with technology" was a challenge. About a quarter mentioned that the need to care for a person close to them was a challenge, and the same number listed health problems. As well, a quarter said that even in retirement, they did not have enough time to pursue their interests. Fifteen

per cent indicated that their retirement income was insufficient.

YURA would like to thank its members for taking time to respond to the survey. We hope that you will review a summary of the full results on our web page where they will be posted between October 7th and 11th: www.yorku.ca/yura

--Ian Greene, co-president

LIFE AS IT WAS BACK THEN

Our 39th Reminiscence is that of Margarete Wolfram who retired from the Department of Psychology in 2016 after more than 40 years of service. Her prime area of expertise is educational psychology; however, when her views on educational practices clashed with those of the Faculty of Education, she shifted to her second favourite area of interest, methodology and statistics. Her fondness for this subject dates back to her early undergraduate years, when she was awarded a teaching assistantship at the University of Geneva. Tutoring in statistics at Simon Fraser University was her first job after immigrating to Canada. Since her retirement, she has returned to educational psychology, dedicating herself to the refinement and promotion of her method of teaching children to read through immersion in a written text. She has entitled her memoirs as "How I became a developmental psychologist."

don't remember a time when I was not sure about my goals. One of the earliest writings I ever produced was a list of all that I was striving for. Among them were 2 horses, 20 cows, 4 pigs, 10 sheep, 12 geese, 15 chickens, 10 rabbits and 8 children. I wanted to be a farmer. With the passage of time, a serious obstacle became apparent. We did not have a farm for me to take over, and no farmer's son showed up wanting to marry me. Even if there

had been one, he would not have been able to provide me with the large-scale enterprise I had in mind. In the part of Germany where I grew up, all the farms were tiny and could not support a family. Rethinking my goal, I realized that what I liked about farming was making things grow.

While meadows and fields were in short supply, children were not. During the 1950s, there were plenty of orphanages with children in need of care. I decided to shelve the goal of having eight kids of my own and instead become an educator in a children's home. Yet, having to scale back my farming ambitions left me somewhat frustrated. It was clear that - as a home educator - I would have to take my cues not only from Mother Nature but from administrators who might or might not share my values. As a seven-year-old, I had eagerly helped my older brother to cultivate a piece of land we had leased to grow potatoes, I did not quite feel the same zeal jumping into an apprenticeship to become a home educator, which I could have done at the age of 15. So, not being in a hurry, I followed my mother's wishes to advance my formal schooling. As might be expected, my education was going to have an effect on my later career choice, but it did so in a rather twisted fashion, which is why I want to elaborate on the issue of schooling in Germany at the time.

During the 1950s, most students left school after eight years. Only about 5% of the population graduated from high school, and in the rural hinterlands, where I grew up, the number was even lower. Higher education, i.e., middle or high school, did not only mean more years of schooling; it meant an accelerated and enriched program, and it started with grade five. Admission required an entrance exam. Apart from the performance level required, there were several other obstacles.

Taking the exam was not part of the school routine; it was up to the parents whether they wanted to have their child sit for the examination. Many of those who only had a grade eight education did not see the need for their offspring to go further than they

had, especially since, up to the mid 1950s, there was a monthly fee to be paid, whereas as an apprentice or a labourer a young person would start generating an income right away. High schools only existed in cities and larger towns; they were not easily accessible to country dwellers. Furthermore, education was considered a privilege, and students were readily expelled if their performance or conduct was found wanting. As an example, during my last three school years, my cohort of 30 was reduced to 20.

My mother did not shy away from any sacrifices to ensure that her children received what had been denied to her. After overcoming some early obstacles, due to my difficulties in learning foreign languages, I enjoyed school, especially during my last three years when I attended a high-quality institution. Since the school was too far for daily commuting, I had to move away from my 12-house hamlet and live in a rented room in a nearby town. I soon befriended a classmate whose father was a judge. My friend had a boyfriend; however, she was only allowed to go out when she had finished her homework. Since she had trouble writing essays, she often found herself grounded. Having a keen sense of economy, not going out because of unfinished homework seemed to me a perfect waste of a boyfriend. Writing essays was easy for me, and I volunteered to write hers as well as mine. For a while this arrangement went on without a hitch until I realized that the essays she submitted consistently got better grades than the ones I handed in. Her explanation was simple; when we had to read our work in class, I did so in a halting fashion, whereas she spoke with confidence and expression. As it turned out, my ghost-writing activity resulted in more trouble for me.

As we approached our graduation, the question arose of what to do with our lives. Our home teacher, who had come to know us over the last three years, was offering us advice. I had known all along that I wanted to become a home educator; however, my teacher informed me, I was now too

educated for such a job. People who graduate from high school go to university and enter professional careers. It took me some time to have this change of plan sink in, but the idea of attending university appealed to me. So, I decided to study psychology and become a child psychologist. As for my friend, she was going to follow in her father's footsteps and study law. Yet, our teacher rejected both plans. As she explained, to become a psychologist, one needed plenty of sensibility, a readiness to feel for others and the ability to put oneself into their shoes. This was not my forte, instead I was logical, detached. I would make a good lawyer. By contrast, my friend had exactly the qualities needed to become a psychologist. How did the teacher know? She knew from the type of essays we wrote, meaning the type of essays she thought we wrote, when in reality I wrote both types!

Even now, I fail to understand how the teacher's view could affect me, given that it was clearly ill-founded, but it did. My family did not welcome the idea of me becoming a psychologist either. At the time, the discipline was still new, and it did not seem an area in which one could earn a living. As one member of my clan put it, I might as well choose to play the violin. So, I shelved the plan of becoming a psychologist in favour of studying law and eventually becoming a youth judge like my friend's father. Yes, the preoccupation with children and making a difference for them was still there, although now greatly altered.

There was one more thing to do before I could start my studies. German universities required proficiency in two foreign languages. I only knew English, having dropped French early. The plan was to go to Geneva as an au pair to upgrade my French. A job offer from the family of a psychiatrist piqued my interest, because I still harboured a penchant for the related discipline of psychology. As it turned out, it was not the psychiatrist who was to affect my future but his wife, the daughter of a well-known philosopher, Arnold Raymond, who had died two years earlier.

When I mentioned to the daughter of the family that I really would have liked to study psychology, her answer was, "If you are interested in psychology, you should look into the courses of a professor here in Geneva. He used to be a student of my grandpa. His name is Jean Piaget. I think he is famous." My landlady, who had known Piaget since her childhood, wrote a little note asking him for the favour of letting me audit his courses. Piaget suggested that I start attending his lab. I got my first introduction to psychology from his research assistant, Mark Lambercier. Everything in the basement room of the *Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau* was ancient, including Gauloise-Bleu-smoking Lambercier, who was so worn out that he could not finish a sentence in one breath. It was November of 1959.

The term had started several weeks previously, and I was out of step with the other students. Old Lambercier sat me down in a corner. He dug up a bunch of cents from his pocket, ten of them, and instructed me to toss those ten coins and write down how many heads and how many tails came up and repeat that process 40 times. He taught me how to make a frequency distribution and graph the results. It was my first statistics lesson, where I learned about the normal distribution of chance events. Later in the term, I learned about visual illusions, how to measure them, what determines their magnitude and how they manifest themselves in the appearance of objects in the environment. But what about sensibility and all the other qualities that in the eyes of my high school teacher I was lacking? Nobody at the institute cared about that. Piaget's approach to psychology was that of a natural scientist. It was quite different from what was in vogue in Germany at the time. I loved it! I promptly wiped the plan of studying law from my agenda and decided to study psychology in Geneva under Piaget.

Was Piaget famous? When I came to his lab in 1959 there were 14 students in that old basement room. When I left in June of 1964, the lab had been moved

to a big bright hall on the main floor, where two young assistants shouted their instructions to the 200 students assembled there. In the spring of 1960, about 30 students attended Piaget's seminar. Four years later the auditorium, designed for 300, was filled to the rafters. The typical scenario was that late arrivals waited for Piaget to enter. As soon as he did, the door was closed for good, and everybody left standing sat down on the floor. There was no way anybody could still have entered. And, no, there were no fire regulations, at least none that we knew about.

What changed over the four years was not only the numbers but also the type of students who came. They came from all over the world. Some of them had already completed their studies in another area. One of them was Seymour Papert, a mathematician, who later cofounded the Artificial Intelligence lab at MIT. There was Juan Pascual-Leone, a medical doctor, who would later build his reputation at York University as a neo-Piagetian and further expand Piaget's theory. He soon became a member of Piaget's team of research assistants. We used to love his presentations. At the seminar, research assistants would present works in progress, preliminary results and their interpretation. Piaget would often counter with his own interpretation, to which the RAs dutifully respond with, "Oui, Monsieur." Not so Pascual-Leone, who tended to stand his ground. We used to refer to the vigorous discussions between JP and JP-L as "la Corrida" (the bull fight). Far from blindly accepting what the old man said, famous though he was, we formed a team of volunteer research assistants under Pascual-Leone's guidance, repeating Piaget's experiments, trying to prove him wrong. We actually did so in several instances, or better said, we expanded on his theory. The fact that, in my second year of study, I was appointed by the university as a teaching assistant in statistics helped my acceptance into this active circle, where everyone had to pull his/her weight.

What I found at the University of Geneva was not only an outstanding professor who became a dominant force in the field of psychology but a cohort of fellow students who created a bubbling pool of intellectual activity. They had come to Geneva knowing full well what they were looking for. I greatly value having stumbled into this fertile climate like a blind chicken finding a rich meal.

—Margarete Wolfram

VISITING RUSSIA AND THE BALTIC STATES

My first trip to Russia occurred in 2008 on a coach tour that left from Helsinki, Finland. I arrived a few days earlier to visit Helsinki, which was very pleasant. My hotel was within walking distance of the pier: I took many boat tours to the various islands and bus tours of the city and surroundings. It took many hours for our coach to reach St Petersburg and it was very striking when we crossed the border into Russia how the countryside was not so cleanly kept as it had been on the Finnish side. We were all very disappointed by the poverty so evident all the way to St Petersburg: the countryside residents lived in dilapidated and listing wooden houses that seemed to be on the verge of collapsing. It was, honestly, a very depressing and boring trip to our destination.

St Petersburg, on the other hand, was wonderful, full of history and splendid architecture and our guides were impressive with their knowledge and very helpful. We visited all of the sites (the last czar's family tomb in the beautiful Peter Paul Cathedral, the Heritage Museum, the Yusupof Palace where Rasputin was assassinated, and the famed Mariinsky Theatre). The Heritage Museum is simply an incredible place for which there is never enough time. Too much to see. (I returned there on a private trip in 2010 with acquaintances

who worked in various French museums and spent an entire week at the Hermitage itself where we even had loosely supervised access to a storage room. On four evenings, we also had dinner at the apartment of different Russian intellectuals. They were warm, exquisitely learned, and the conversations flowed into the nights. They lived in modest conditions, although each had been able to keep hidden a few treasures of their great-grandparents who had lived more grandiosely. These treasures had survived the purges and the terrible years of WWII when the city then called Leningrad was under siege and bombardment from the Germans.)

While in St Petersburg, we went by coach to visit the lovely and romantic Catherine Palace as well as Peterhof. At the Peterhof, we were able to tour the splendid gardens only as the palace itself was being renovated.



Peterhof (Peter's Palace) Gardens



Catherine's Palace: the grand staircase

Unfortunately, despite all of this beauty, our enjoyment was marred by the fact that several of my fellow tourists were victims of theft in front of everyone. Four men in our group even had to fight together while being attacked by men who were trying to get their photographic equipment.

One woman from New Zealand had her wallet stolen: it contained all her money, credit cards, and passport. I had seen this happen in front of the

Spanish Steps in Rome where a professor I was visiting had his wallet easily taken by a pickpocket kid who then had hollered at us with glee waving my colleague's wallet and throwing it away after he had taken the money. So, I mentioned it to the lady, and she returned to the place where, sure enough, a woman gave her back her wallet minus the \$2,000. Our guide did not want to report the incident to the police because nothing would have been done (on my next tour, it was explained that the police was corrupt). We also noticed that our bus driver had repeatedly to pay the guards at parking spaces that had already been reserved and paid for. But it was still necessary to get in. Bribery was a way of life.

We stayed at a huge and typically massive Russian hotel built in the 1960s (interestingly enough, over half of the tourists were from China). When I returned two years later, we stayed at the hotel Angleterre within walking distance to the Hermitage Museum.

On the coach tour, our other key destination was Moscow. In between, we visited the few ruins left of Novgorod, the ancient fortified Russian capital, as well as the splendid Zagorsk monastery. The rest of the drive to Moscow was uninteresting. In Moscow, we visited the main attractions, including a part of the Kremlin, St Basil Cathedral, the

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Bolshoi Theatre, Lenin's Mausoleum, and some gardens. We also took a pleasant boat tour on the Moskva river. We went to the well-known GUM department store reserved for tourists and rich Russians and party members but many of us were too afraid to go far into it and huddled near the door until our guide returned! The problem again was that we were always followed by pickpockets and, as I was trying to go in the middle of the famous bridge near the Kremlin, I could see three men positioning themselves to trap me and take my handbag. I yelled at them the only Russian word that I could remember which was "Durack" or stupid and I walked away back to my group. In other words, one had to be constantly on alert. I don't know if things have changed since. Moscow is an enormous city with many attractive sites, but we didn't spend enough time in it, and it was a cold place in terms of atmosphere.

Then on our way to the Baltic countries we had to go through Belorussia and its capital, Minsk. The drive from Moscow was a day long and again totally boring with nothing to see. At that time in 2008, Minsk had an eight-lane main avenue with no traffic at all. It was all just pure ostentation. I can't remember if we slept over there but I assume so and I only remember huge statues of communist figures as well as an enormous white building that might have been the presidential Palace.

By contrast, the Baltic countries of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia were delightful, historical, very attractive and well kept, with too much to see for the few days that were allocated to them. They were relatively safe and the people very helpful. We returned to Helsinki via a ferry and it was another pleasant and scenic experience. I should also add that, as airports go, the airport at Helsinki was pleasant and attractively designed and less hectic.

–Anne-Marie Ambert

I never thought it could happen to us. Not long ago I walked out the front door of our condo building carrying an envelope containing a large amount of cash. On the way, I met a pleasant young man who greeted me by saying the agreed-upon name: Judge Martin Bowser. I gave him the envelope. Before I got back to our apartment my husband had got a phone call from our grandson, who lives and works in a U.S. city, thanking us and saying that he had been released on bail. We were greatly relieved, thinking we had reached a satisfactory end to a highly stressful, emotionally draining day.

Events leading to that moment had begun in mid-morning while I was out shopping. My husband received a phone call from our grandson saying that he was in a police station and needed help. Having woken up with flu-like symptoms he'd asked a friend to drive him to a clinic for a Covid test. The friend had borrowed his brother's car to do so. They got to the clinic and the test was negative but on the way back they were stopped by police, who found 20 lbs. of drugs somewhere in the car and arrested both young men. They were in the police station and he would have to spend a week in jail waiting for the Hearing unless he could raise what he called an "Appearance bond" to ensure that he'd stick around for his court appearance. He told us how much money he needed (in \$U.S.) and was very insistent that we tell no one else about it (not even his parents). If we did so and word got out, he said, he could jeopardize police efforts to catch the car's owner and also his chances of being released without charge.

Our pseudo-grandson then turned the phone over to a man who said he was a police officer. He put my husband in touch with an RCMP officer named Bryan Evans, allegedly based somewhere in Alberta, who would serve as liaison person between us and them. My husband had several conversations

with this so-called officer, who did have an Alberta telephone number. He never answered the phone himself but always had to be paged, and seemed to be speaking from an office where police business was going on in the background.

Our pseudo-grandson called once more, to tell us that Canadian \$ in cash would be acceptable as long as the total equaled the U.S. amount. I chastised him for not telling us that sooner and he was very contrite. I also cracked a weak joke and he chuckled in a very familiar way. I had not the slightest doubt that I was speaking to our grandson.

It took several hours, and visits to several branches of our bank, to put the requested amount together. My husband called Evans to tell him we had the money; Evans told him to pack it in a plain envelope and wait for a courier to come for it. We did this. When the courier arrived, he said he could not or would not drive into the property or come to the door of our building; we were to make the delivery outside. I did so on the walkway leading to our Gatehouse. So certain was I that it would fulfill its intended purpose that I didn't even ask the "courier" for a receipt or any other evidence that we had paid it. And that was the end of it, or so we thought with relief. We only had to wait for the charges to be dismissed; our grandson would be free and clear, and we would get the money back.

Not so. The next morning right after breakfast we got another phone call, this one from a man with a pronounced American drawl, saying that he was the Prosecutor in the case and was very anxious to keep our grandson out of jail and from getting a criminal record, but he needed another payment of the same amount to do so. This did sound suspicious: why was the first amount not enough, and why was it the "Prosecutor" who was so anxious to protect our grandson's reputation? This time we decided to investigate further. My husband called the only lawyer we know and told her the situation. After

listening for a while and occasionally commenting "That's a red flag," she told us to stop right away, not to give any more money but to call the police.

We then did what we should have done at the beginning: searched for information that would confirm what our callers had been telling us. What we learned instead was that we had been well and thoroughly deceived. Our grandson was fine; had not been arrested and was not in jail, and in fact knew nothing about the matter. We learned this simply by phoning him, which we should have done at the very beginning. We also took our lawyer's advice and called the police.

Why us?

How did we let ourselves get caught in this way? We always hang up on callers who tell us we owe a lot of money to the Canada Revenue Agency or that there are suspicious charges on our Visa bill. We delete suspicious email messages or send Phishing notifications to the companies whose logos they have appropriated. In other words, we are aware there are a lot of scammers out there and that one can't be too careful. Which turns out to be very true.

The only answer is that we love and trust our grandson. He is a good person, and more than that he has a good job and a lovely girlfriend. Why would he want to jeopardize all that by getting involved in what must be one of the most dangerous occupations there is? And we had no doubt that the phone calls and the request for money were coming directly from him. His voice was familiar, though slightly hoarse, as it would be if he had a cold. His manner of speaking was also familiar, even though he sounded very upset and anxious, as one would expect him to be in the circumstances. We were being subjected to a form of emotional terrorism; all that mattered was helping our grandson.

We were not alone in this. A quick web search for "grandparents' scams" brings up a number of sites,

one describing what the Toronto Police Service is doing to address the problem:

<https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/toronto-police-warn-residents-about-grandparents-scam-costing-people-thousands-of-dollars-1.5811352>

It describes people who got into a similar situation, some of whom ended up paying out a lot more money than we did. There are a good many other sites dealing with the issue. Check them, or have someone do it for you, for suggestions on how to protect yourself.

Here are a few things that we have learned from this experience, in addition to what's available on the web:

1. Check to determine the legitimacy of any request for money or other assistance even if you're threatened with repercussions if you do. Try to phone the petitioner immediately.

2. Make sure the phone numbers you have for all your family members are up to date and easily accessible if needed.

3. AND – If you get a suspicious phone call of the type I've described, **call the Toronto Police Service at 416-808-1400 and ask for the Crime Prevention Officer.**

–A retired faculty member who prefers to remain anonymous

CANADA'S WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) RESEARCH

The most interesting period of my time at York was definitely the six years I spent as a member of the Biological and Chemical Defence Review Committee (BCDRC) In the late 1980's I received a phone call from a Brigadier General (the late Jim Cotter) asking me if I would be the Chemical representative on a panel of three including a representative from Engineering and one from Pharmacy. The occasion arose because it had been reported at the UN that Canada had never engaged in weapons of mass destruction, as they were to become known. This was demonstrably untrue. Indeed, John Bryden, an MP for Hamilton had written a book, *Deadly Allies*[1], which detailed Canada's involvement in biological and chemical weapons over many decades. This new committee would scour Canada's facilities from coast to coast, examining all the work currently underway **to ensure that present work was only for defensive purposes.** Two weeks of every year was allotted to travelling to military bases, research centers and private contractors, to examine the books and facilities and report back to the Government.

The first visit was on the eve of Desert Shield to Halifax Naval Base where a contingent was being prepared to go to the Gulf (1990). We toured a ship being outfitted with defensive measures for nuclear, biological and chemical attack, and were briefed on the weapons and procedures in place for defensive maneuvers. The main features were a sealed area below decks and an exterior spraying system to wash the entire ship with sea water while the crew stayed under wraps. There was also a demonstration of a rather clumsy looking nerve agent detector using a harmless test agent. While there we were fingerprinted and set up with ID profiles.

A few weeks later we visited Ottawa Defence Headquarters to be briefed, under strict security. The agent showed up but then found out that we did not have completed security clearance, so the agent sat the entire half hour in virtual silence, hardly even responding to “pass-the-time” talk . This was followed by lunch in the House of Commons Dining Room with *Deadly Allies* author, MP John Bryden. It was buffet style, but with an elegance and variety I had never seen the likes of anywhere before or since. Cornucopia would be an understatement.

We then flew to Toronto to visit a couple of government contractors and attend a session for concerned members of the public. Finally, we went to Medicine Hat to visit the Government Research establishment at Sutton. This was probably one of the most interesting places, where stores of the chemical and biological agents were kept. One of the early ones (WWI), Mustard Gas (actually an oily liquid), had been found to have use as a chemotherapy agent for cancer therapy, but it could not be designated as such because of secrecy. In one lab a supply of nerve gas (another liquid) was kept in a locked container for lab use. A technician unlocked the small door to reveal a shelf on which a round bottom flask lay on its side. Slight vibrations caused the flask to start to roll towards the edge of the shelf and was just stopped in time. There was enough in there to kill everyone in the large lab. This incident was included in our report on safety matters. Not the first such incident over the years, apparently.

In a big cold storage room, we saw examples of biological agents kept under liquid nitrogen. At those temperatures they become crystallized, and some have exquisite crystal forms which belie their terrible effects. We also saw a huge self-contained incineration unit to shred and destroy old chemical weapon shells that were frequently being discovered

in dumps across the country. It was called Nonesuch Incinerator, and was later moved to Swan Hills Alberta to destroy other toxic wastes.

We did finally get security clearance and were given the lowdown on designated chemical threat areas. Iraq did not appear to be one of those, so I was very disillusioned by a certain UK politician’s enthusiastic endorsement of the reports of chemical weapons there. Sometime later I bet a visiting US speaker \$100 K if chemical weapons facilities were ever found there, without divulging my sources of course.

The following six years (until 1996) was the same sort of schedule: visit a military base; Headquarters in Ottawa; private contractor somewhere; and the government Research establishment in Sutton. After two years the two older members retired, and two younger experts took their place. I became Chair of the Committee and also found that we had been assigned a military rank (Major General) so that we could be treated accordingly at military bases

As Chair, I had been promoted from one star to two stars , and this qualified me for the gold-plated bathroom faucets at military bases where we might be accommodated in the Officers Mess. One such site was at the Shilo Headquarters of the Western Army, where we met around the Table on which General James Wolfe died at The Battle of the Plains of Abraham (1759). We then spent the 50th anniversary of D-Day racing across the Prairie in the latest German Panzers with troops training under NATO provisions.

One year we visited the Esquimalt Naval Base on Vancouver Island. Another year we flew from Calgary airport to the Wainwright Air Force base north east of Edmonton in a Twin Otter at about 10,000 ft, low enough to be able to navigate from a road map. We had to wear headphones to cover the din of the engines and stay in communication with

the pilot. As we approached the air base, flashes of fire and puffs of smoke were seen off the port wing. We had entered a training exercise area. I heard the pilot calling “mayday, mayday, Otter XXYZ not part of exercise. Cease fire, Cease fire !” We landed safely and got about business as usual, even meeting one of Canada’s top female fighter pilots who might have tried to shoot us down.

We also looked at training manuals and observed classes. What a contrast with civilian education. I was also asked to take an officers’ training course on WMD in Petawawa Ontario, and learned some interesting teaching techniques. Homework consisted of working out scenarios in groups. One evening we deliberated on the best way to launch a covert biological attack. When the current pandemic first started, I was mildly surprised at how closely the situation developed along the lines of that piece of homework.

During those first years and since, there has been a spurt in biological developments and even weaponization around the world, particularly post 9-11. Many of these developments have not adequately considered safety, relevance or morality. In 2003 an outbreak of a Covid virus (SARS) introduced a new angle. A virus that was very susceptible to artificial variations under the heading “gain of function,” something that could be either good or bad. Nature cannot be patented (35 US Code #101) but an artificial derivative, maybe. It’s a linguistic problem. Making it as a weapon is illegal under the 1972 Convention on the Prohibition of Biological Weapons. But like genetically modified corn, it can “escape” into Nature and self-replicate. Almost all world-changing wars up to the 20th century were won by Nature afflicting one side (*Rats Lice and History*, Hans Zinsser [2]). I often wonder how the current BCDRC (Biological and Chemical Review Committee) members are

handling these new developments as I believe there is a good case to be made for a serious revamp of Laws and Conventions in this area. One hopes it is not too late.

[1] *Deadly Allies*, John Bryden. 1989. McClelland and Stewart Inc.

[2] *Rats, Lice and History*, Hans Zinsser. 1935. Routledge Publishing.

--Clive E. Holloway



(Contributed by **Stephanie Ambert**)

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